

Glasgow
Herald
17th Nov '87

CHANNEL 4 last week broadcast a film of Tony Harrison reading his poem, V.

The publicity it was given was due not to the quality of the poem itself or to Harrison's status as translator of the Oresteia and adapter of the Mysteries for the National Theatre, but to the fact that the poem contained most of the monosyllabic English swearwords.

It was consequently, "a torrent of filth," according to the Daily Mail, and "a cascade of obscenities," according to Gerald Howarth MP. Mary Whitehouse wrote to the Home Secretary, demanding the resignation of Lord Thomson, chairman of the IBA.

The absurdity of these attacks and the predictable behaviour of the stock characters may lull us into a benign tolerance: we've heard it before, we'll surely hear it again. But I think it's more serious, and certainly more depressing, than that.

First, briefly, the poem itself. It is set in a cemetery in Leeds where Harrison, visiting his parents' grave, notices the graffiti sprayed on the gravestones. The swearwords, defiling the memorials to the dead, are the point of departure for Harrison's ruminations on the physical and mental wasteland of the industrial north-east, and on the power of language side by side with inarticulateness.

Amateurs of smut, filth, and moral turpitude may remember Mr Howarth as the sponsor of a Bill in the last Parliament to amend the Obscene Publications Acts. The Bill would have brought television within the scope of the Acts and changed the test of obscenity to whatever "a reasonable person would regard as grossly offensive." The Bill fell for lack of time, but there is every reason to suppose it will be revived, not least Mr Howarth's prominence in the present affair.

I think we may assume that Mr Howarth regards himself as a reasonable person and the poem V, as grossly offensive. It would follow, then, that Harrison, the London Review of Books (where the poem first appeared), Penguin Books (Selected Poems), and Channel 4 should be prosecuted — and convicted. Lord Thomson would not, of course, have survived the showing of Scum.

The repression involved in that little scenario is one aspect of the matter, but equally disturbing is the militant philistinism which it illustrates, the assault on the value of language and the rigour of logic. To misunderstand, or misrepresent, the function and context of the swearwords in V indicates an aesthetic sterility which is becoming ever more dominant in the debate of public issues.

If the Howarth and Whitehouse strain of intellectual vandalism is unappealing, its growing incorporation into law should be a cause of alarm and considerably more robust reaction than has so far been demonstrated.

The imbecilic reaction to V is at once a microcosm of a wider malaise and a detail in a planned incursion into artistic and media freedom.

Denunciation of the evils of video and television has fallen into a pattern of what might be called the forced convergence of parallel lines, deducing causation where only coincidence can be demonstrated. On the one hand, football riots, rising crime rate, increasing violence; on the other, video, television; therefore, the one is caused by the other. What some might



Tony Harrison (left) provoked strong reactions from Mrs Mary Whitehouse (centre)

call the symptoms are "proved" to be the disease.

The most recent example of this deduction from parallels was after the Hungerford massacre. Before the first victims had been buried, Mrs Whitehouse was on television with all the controlled zest of a professional mourner, quoting unnamed reports to sustain her thesis that television was to blame. It was not a performance easily associated with the Christian virtues she so warmly accords herself.

And what was the evidence to support the guilt theory of television? The significant fact about the post-Hungerford analysis was that no newspaper (and how some must have tried!) could find evidence to show that Ryan had been unnaturally addicted to violent television or to video nasties.

The horror of Hungerford was precisely the absence of cause; but that could not be borne, and so television was lynched.

Predictable in the present state of the tabloids, this "link" was an appalling abdication of responsibility by the quality press, and the repetition which made the connection seem respectable was in fact the more reprehensible in the absence of any

CHRISTOPHER FREW the growing censorship movement Tony Harrison

evidence to prove, or even plausibly to suggest, such a theory.

If this was an aberration on the part of the press, it forms a consistent part of the repertoire of publicity tricks employed by Whitehouse (I use the lower case in a generic sense). The most intense and successful example of the Whitehouse strategy was the video nasties' campaign which culminated in the Video Recordings Act 1984. That campaign repays study if we are reactively to anticipate what Mr Howarth's remarks and his Bill portend.

In early 1982 the trade body, the British Videogram Association (BVA), worried by the emphasis on violence in advertisements for a number of video titles, referred the advertisements to the Advertising Standards Authority. At about the same time, the BVA asked the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) to set up a working party to review the

problem

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1 EXED QUESTION Of CENSORSHIP



) and Gerald Howarth MP (right) with his poem, V.

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's controversial poem, V.

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respect of cinema film
on, and the BVA envisaged
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by the industry. It is clear
deo industry itself was early
the problem of the nasties
prompt and responsible

vement at this point were
near distance. Asked in the
is in October, 1982 if
were envisaged to impose
classification, Christopher
referred to the projected
FC report and added:
uch a scheme be introduced,
I wish to assess its effect
iding whether any statutory
were required."

measure of the political
ness of the Whitehouse
that, within 18 months, a

perniciously worded Bill was on its
triumphant way through Parliament
in an atmosphere such that anyone
voicing any reservation its wording or
consequences was howled down as a
champion of porn if not a corrupter of
children.

Mrs Whitehouse, supported by the
tabloids, most notably the Mail,
usurped the concern shown by the
BVA, and by late 1982 the campaign
to amplify and distort the nasties'
influence was under way. Every evil
under the sun was attributed to their
pervasive influence, and video as a
whole took on some of the scapegoat
qualities once attributed to Original
Sin.

The single most potent element of
the campaign was the allegation that
children were put at risk. Authority
for this assumption was the speciously
named Parliamentary Group Video
Enquiry, which purported to show

that over 40% of under-sevens had
seen at least one video nasty.

This report was published to
coincide with the second reading of the
Video Recording Bill, and effectively
precluded rational debate, providing
"evidence" against which it was
impossible to argue. The report was,
as one of the group said, "exactly what
we wanted."

It was only after the "debate" had
been won that doubts began to
surface. Significant was the fact that
the "Parliamentary Group" had no
parliamentary status whatsoever. Not
irrelevant was the fact that the
Methodist and Roman Catholic
churches, originally co-opted to
support the inquiry, formally
disassociated themselves from the
report.

Precisely to the point was the fact
that the Oxford Polytechnic Television
Research Unit, commissioned to carry
out the research on which the report
was to be based, had, the week before
its publication, repudiated the
framework, context, and conclusions
of the report.

The head of the unit, the Rev. Brian
Brown, based his denunciation on the
not unreasonable ground that he had
seen a copy of the report — with it

conclusions — written before any of
his unit's data was available: blanks
had been left where the data were to
appear. It is not surprising that the
report was exactly what they wanted.

Sceptical towards the abnormally
high incidence of video nasty
penetration alleged in the report, a
separate academic group prepared a
second questionnaire, based on the
PGVE original but including invented
titles of lurid nature as well as genuine
titles. As a result of the survey, 68% of
the children questioned claimed to
have seen a video nasty which *did not*
exist. On such rigorous evidence was
the Video Recordings Act driven into
law.

Two further veterans of the video
campaign lie quiescent, awaiting
revival in the drive for a more
stringent Obscene Publications Act.
First, the paradoxical combination of
parental concern and parental
ineptitude. Those who accept without
question that "you can't stop children
seeing the stuff" are the same pillars of
society who call for oppressive
legislation to compensate for their
spectacular inadequacy.

Second is the implication of the
insidious little phrase in 4(1) of the
Video Recordings Act, where
classification is to have "special regard
to the likelihood of video works . . .
being viewed in the home." That
phrase, inserted at a late stage,
provides justification for a stricter
video classification than for the
cinema version. Where the privacy of
the home was once the cornerstone of
family values, it is now draped in the
most ominous implications.

It is taking account of these
underlying assumptions, as well as his
keen critical faculty, that we should
observe Mr Howarth's reappearance
as champion of virtue and likely
sponsor of a revived Bill.

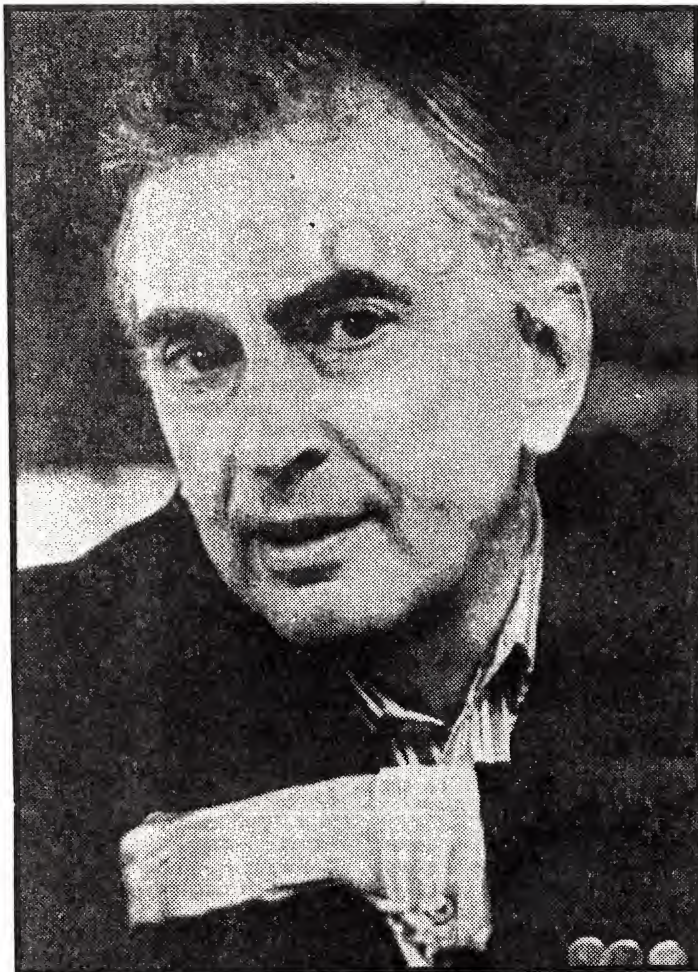
It seems simple: what a "reasonable
person" would find grossly offensive.
David Mellor, Home Office Minister
at the time of Howarth's first attempt,
foresaw no problem: "A reasonable
person can tell the difference between
trash and art." But what constitutes a
reasonable person? Mr Howarth and
Mrs Whitehouse? Or Jeremy Isaacs
and Michael Grade? Are they
mutually exclusive or inscrutably
harmonious?

Mr Mellor was confident that the
courts would solve the problem:
"There are quite a number of people
who are trying to pollute our society
with unacceptable filth. But for too
long the courts have been inhibited
from making a sensible decision." Not
only reasonable now, but sensible.

What Mr Mellor meant, and the
video campaign bore him out, was
that when prosecutions were brought
under the existing law, juries refused,
with irritating regularity, to convict,
even though numerous attempts were
made. The Evil Dead, for example,
was subject to 40 separate pieces of
litigation, a "quite lamentable
situation" in the opinion of the judge
who roundly criticised the Director of
Public Prosecutions, while awarding
full costs against him. Most
unsatisfactory.

The spate of seizures, prosecutions,
and intimidation at the height of the
nasties' hysteria brought the law into
disrepute, and the subjective terms of
the proposed amendment would have
exactly the same effect.

Howarth and Whitehouse assured
Channel 4 of increased viewing for
their programme, to the benefit of
poetry, but we should beware lest that
turn out to be a sacrificial pawn in the
service of their tireless and implacable
mediocrity.



Gore Vidal

THE SCOTSMAN, Saturday, November 21, 1987 V

Matters of substance confronting a stylist

By CHRISTOPHER FREW

TO REACH the Connaught Hotel in Mayfair from Oxford Street, you pass through Grosvenor Square, where the Italian Embassy was afire with green, white and red. But, if Italy's president is unable to come to Britain, at least one of its most prominent foreign residents has arrived on a stately visit. Gore Vidal is in town.

The occasion is the publication of his fourth collection of essays, *Armageddon?* and the latest of his historical sequence of novels, *Empire*.

I asked him about *Empire*, set around the time of the Spanish-American war at the turn of the century, and about the "Biography of America", as a whole: how did it start?

"Washington DC was the beginning of it. It was about the world that I had come out of and I felt that, it being of interest to me, it might be so for others. Very few American writers know anything about politics or, perhaps, any subject other than themselves — sacred subject! — but that was the beginning. Then, as I got more involved in politics, I got more and more interested in the origins of the country. What a short history, only 200 years! And now. I've lived

"I spent \$100,000 and came in second to Jerry Brown who had two and a half million dollars, and ahead of two professional politicians who'd spent their whole lives at it. They had to pretend it never happened: there was no follow-up at the end of the campaign, because, if they acknowledged what I'd done, they would be acknowledging that the whole thing is so corrupt that an honest voice not in thrall to the aerospace industry, the banks, the real estate lobby or the Mafia — that someone can still get a lot of votes.

"But now, as a result of defence spending, we're now two trillion dollars in debt, we've destroyed our economy. This has been clear to me for a long time, for the last six years I've been talking about it, but nobody would listen!

"But I did get credit for one specific thing which I predicted in my *Playboy* interview and I think it was the *Wall Street Journal* picked up on it: that I had predicted almost precisely the nature of the depression. And I went out of the dollar and doubled my capital... now this is taken very seriously with grown-ups!

"But it was just eating an apple

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back and picked certain moments that I thought were significant.

"Yet I am inventing: I have fictional characters mixed in, and this is something I don't know if any respectable novelist has done, which makes me... not respectable! But I've always had great support from the history departments — though not at all from the English departments!

"Academic envy?" A voluptuously martyred sigh: "It could be called that!" Did he write with didactic purpose?

"Oh, I feel, altogether too much; it's my principal fault. If you read *Creation*, say, you are going to learn about Confucius, Socrates, Zoroaster, the Jains and many others that you would never have heard about; and I am very good at that. I think it's very useful to come away from a book knowing a great deal more than before you began. Mary McCarthy has made this point too. She said: 'You know, if you get nothing else out of *War and Peace*, you've learned how to make strawberry jam.' There's a very good recipe in there."

What about non-historical novels? Are they written as a relief from the burden of researching the history? "Those, those are my joys: just to invent!"

Armagedden is the fourth collection of Vidal's essays, now spanning the years 1952-87 and dealing with literary, social, and political phenomena. The grandson of a senator, son of an aviator who was in F.D. Roosevelt's administration, Gore Vidal was born at West Point and grew up among the Washington political aristocracy. He himself has twice run for office, once in 1960 and, in 1982, for the Senate.

"When I stood in '82 for the Senate, it was fascinating, the extent of money in politics: it was all bought and paid — no-one was free. The entire California delegation to the House (of Representatives) and Senate, I would think without exception, are paid for the defence industry.

I've been talking about for years. Of course my equivalents in England couldn't speak out in the same way, as writers are supposed to be immature and irrelevant figures more often than not. As a result, your writers are pretty much like children, if you'll forgive me, because they don't take part in the life of their country as citizens, because they know they're not regarded seriously.

"Doesn't it occasionally go through your mind that not only is England nowhere near democracy, but it is indeed a very open oligarchy, whether it be the powers of the Customs and Excise or the lack of proportional representation? I find all this talk kind of sickening, about Mrs Thatcher's 'Great Mandate': 42 per cent at the first election, 43 per cent at the second and 38 per cent this year — 62 per cent of the country hates her!"

For some reason, this brought Scotland into the conversation.

"I've been to Edinburgh before, about four or five years ago at the Festival, when Anthony Burgess and I performed together at the Assembly Rooms, and I've also been to Glasgow. My grandmother came from Glasgow, her family was called Kay, they were shipbuilders before they came to America and they were very proud of being connected to the Camerons. My great-grandfather, who was Attorney General for the state of Texas, was called Cameron Kay.

"Oh, yes, I think about Scotland — more than I think about England. Scotland has always had a kind of magic because we are what they call Scots-Irish, we aren't at all: what we are is Ulster. And Scots-Irish has always been a misnomer. The Gores, my mother's family, were Anglo-Irish, from Donegal, which is different again."

With which dazzling exhibition of Irish logic, Mr Vidal, shackled to history by his pen, bade farewell to this scribe and went out into the Mayfair night in search of Pharisees for dinner.

Let them bite the bullet after the bomb

OPEN HOUSE

By CHRISTOPHER FREW

A RECENT Press article put me in mind of that old game the balloon debate, where everybody draws a well-known character out of a hat and then has to justify their survival in a balloon basket too small to hold everyone. If you failed to persuade, you were chucked out.

The item was a survey of the preparations made for the safe retreat of a chosen few to safe bunkers in the event of a nuclear attack. It appears that almost no thought was given to the matter during the 1970s, but a radical overhaul has been in progress during the eighties. Various options for sighting the war headquarters are being considered, including "very expensive" proposals for a government deep shelter.

It's good to know, I suppose, that our money is being spent in a good cause, but fortunately the survival of the government is not the only matter which has been given priority in the event of a Doomsday scenario.

In the middle of last year, the British Medical Association (BMA) published a discussion document, *Selection of Casualties for Treatment after a Nuclear Attack*, and here rather different criteria applied. Civil Servants and politicians were not listed high on the treatment list; whether because they were safely tucked away in bunkers or for some other reason, is not clear. Rather, priority would be accorded to those of practical skills, such as carpenters,

plumbers, and masons. Doctors might also be presumed to rank high, while lawyers would be left to negotiate terms of compensation as best they could.

Dr Pauline Cutting, who worked in the besieged refugee camps in the Lebanon, contributed her experience in the drafting of the document, but it is accepted that post-nuclear conditions would be infinitely worse than any "human-scale" disaster, such as the Bradford football fire, the King's Cross disaster, or, more recently, the Lockerbie air crash. The BMA estimate that about half the population (28 million) would be wiped out in a nuclear war, with a further six million injured, a much more pessimistic forecast than Home Office estimates.

Short of standing for office in the hope of quick preferment, or making ostentatious show of our home improvement skills, how should the general public react in the event of imminent nuclear war? Put a paper bag over our heads and run to the

cupboard under the stairs? Queue at the supermarket for food, (micro-wave would be best)? Fortunately, some thought has been given to the eve-of-attack hours, published last November in a study by the South Yorkshire Fire and Civil Defence Authority. Scenarios have been drawn up for potential action in the area and, by extension, for the country as a whole.

Prominent would be the role of the police, who would assume emergency powers to suppress public disorder — and also to round up an estimated 20,000 "subversives" who might pose a threat to State security. This unfortunate group would be interned and would include political activists, pacifists, and trade unionists; name your own, but I wouldn't fancy the chances of such as Arthur Scargill, Tony Benn, or Clive Ponting, not to mention the House of Lords *Spy-catcher* judges.

I don't think that Duncan Campbell should count too strongly on being able to produce any post-nuclear exposés, the less since he laid bear some of the contingency planning in one of his *Secret Society* programmes in which he identified Operation Chanticleere as being this same government survival scheme. In fact, conventional horrors apart, one of the likely characteristics of such post-nuclear society as is intended to emerge would be a rather one-sided political bias — unless pro-

portional representation has somehow crept into the plan by a side door. And I rather doubt that.

Since I may not be around to say it later, I'd better get it off my chest while I can: I protest. The vision of senior Tory politicians sitting deep in their bunkers whilst the last hours of surface activity are dominated by a mad "cops and pacifists" chase in the name of "State security" (by that point, surely, a bad joke) strikes me as misguided and as representing a fundamental error regarding the complexion of a post-nuclear Britain.

The only first-hand folk memory much of Britain has of war is the 1982 Falklands conflict, the first casualty of which was the Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, who resigned on the practical ground that his Ministry had failed to anticipate the events which led to the war. I think the same principle might apply in the case of a nuclear war.

The virtue of a nuclear capability has always been held to be its deterrent effect: we have them so that they need not be used. The Doomsday scenario necessarily explodes, as it were, that argument and the Government should consequently, as it were, resign. But they're hardly likely to do that if they're safe down a bunker with food and communications facilities denied to the rest of us. And, to be fair, would you?

So the only way to take account of what might reasonably be expected

to be "a sharp downturn in government popularity" is to ensure that whatever authority emerges from a post-nuclear Britain, it does not consist of politicians ridden by guilt and obsessed with self-justification, whose policy had, to put it mildly, failed. How to ensure this?

My own modifications to Operation Chanticleere would include the instruction that, in the imminent event of a nuclear attack, the entire Cabinet should be escorted — by South Yorkshire policemen if need be — to the top of the Post Office Tower, where all ventilation would be sealed open. Communications would of course be excellent until the moment when they would be redundant, and it would concentrate the mind of those involved if they were so forcefully reminded of the consequences of their miscalculation.

The rest of us could go about our business, fill in our poll tax forms, play football, bid farewell to loved ones or get drunk, according to inclination. But I think the exposed position of the government would act as a calumet to the public at large, whilst knowledge of their survival, as presently intended, would indeed lead to the sort of ugly behaviour for which the South Yorkshire authorities have so responsibly planned.

The constitutional implications of what might be called "the Mussolini effect" should perhaps be given a wider airing.